DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 378 365 CE 067 974

AUTHOR Miller, Michael T.
TITLE Whatever Happened to the RCU? The Changing Face of State-Level Vocational Education Research.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Agency Role; Comparative Analysis; *Educational Change; Educational Research; *Educational Trends; National Surveys; *Research Coordinating Units; Research Methodology; *Research Projects; Secondary Education; State Agencies; *State Programs; Trend Analysis; *Vocational Education

ABSTRACT

Research coordinating units (RCUs) were created by Congress in 1968 through passage of the Vocational Education Act Amendments. RCUs were state-level agencies for coordinating research and development projects for occupational and vocational education. After RCUs were disbanded in 1984 under the Perkins Act, many of their former research and coordination functions were distributed to other bodies. A study examined states' responses to dissolution of RCUs and subsequent redistribution of research projects at the state level. Letters requesting information about state responses to RCU dissolution were mailed to each state department of education. Responses describing current state-sponsored research on vocational education were received from officials in 25 states. Nearly all of the respondents reported using request-for-proposal announcements, contracts, and grants to conduct research. In many states, research efforts were internal and assigned to individuals with expertise or interest in areas in need of research. The lack of an external, grassroots-driven research base was evident in many states. Congress' disbanding of RCUs has meant the loss of an external body to monitor state departments of education and provide a framework for the methodology and foundations to be used in studying vocational education and its relevance to local needs. (MN)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 378 365

Whatever Happened to the RCU? The Changing Face of State-Level Vocational Education Research

Dr. Michael T. Miller
Assistant Professor and Chair
Higher Education Research Institute
Program in Administration in Higher Education
206 Wilson Hall
University of Alabama
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
(205) 348-1170
FAX: (205) 348-2161

Running Head: Whatever Happened to the RCU?

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M Miller

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CE067774

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

Vocational and technical education have been subjected to much national attention, most notably through the passage of legislation directed at program improvement. In 1968, Congress passed the Vocational Education Act Amendments which created state-level agencies for coordinating research and development projects for vocational and occupational education. These units were disbanded in 1984 under the Perkins Act, and the former research coordination and development functions have subsequently been distributed to any number of bodies. Presented are the reports of how 25 states have responded to the dissolution of research coordinating bodies, including how they have distributed state-level research projects.

Vocational and technical education are both dynamic components of today's formal education system in the United States. Occupational skill instruction has paved the way for an educated workforce which combines skill development with critical thinking and life-skills abilities. The evolution of vocational education has been the beneficiary of many federal and state programs aimed at program improvement. One such directive was the passage of the 1968 Vocational Education Act Amendments (PL 90-576), which provided block grants to states to operate vocational research coordinating units.

The research coordinating units which were mandated in the 1968 Amendments were developed to both improve vocational education programs at both the secondary and postsecondary level, and to increase the umbrella definition of vocational education. The legislation was created to further align vocational instruction with general education, to better coordinate state and federal efforts to identify exemplary programs, and to develop a closer relationship between schools and business and industry (Nystrom & Bayne, 1979).

The research coordinating units (RCUs) operated until 1984 when the Carl Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act (PL 98-524) was passed by Congress. The Perkins Act "continued the federal intent to fund supplemental programs or program improvement activities, rather than to supplant funding for existing programs" (Miller & Mahler, 1991, p. 29). Additionally,

the Act allowed states to disband their RCU's, and placed stricter guidelines on how federal monies were to be spent.

The dissolution of the RCU's provided a gap in research and development activities for many state departments of education, who subsequently worked more closely with research components in colleges and universities. The subsequent passage of the Perkins Amendments in 1990 restricted even more tightly the allowable funds available for research and development. The result has been the decrease in state-level autonomy to conduct intensive research and development activities, now relying primarily on reactive research initiatives, and reporting measures for compliance.

The current study was developed to identify what has happened on a state-by-state basis to the former RCU's, and to investigate how state-level vocational education research is accomplished.

Background of the Study

Vocational education has undergone substantial changes during its evolution, receiving attention from local institutions and community groups, professional bodies, and state and federal officials (Miller & Mahler, 1991). As early as 1601, "vocational" training programs in the form of apprenticeships were being regulated by local bodies (Roberts, 1957), a trend which spread throughout the colonies. The necessity to provide practical, hands-on education to a broad cross section of society

eventually led to the passage of the Morrill Land-Grant Act in 1862. The Morrill legislation was intended to "prepare students for leadership in developing the agricultural, (mechanical arts), and other natural resources of (their) state" (Prosser & Quigley, 1949, p. 525).

The Morrill legislation also provided the precedence necessary for continued national level involvement in promoting vocational training. Subsequent legislation included the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, the George-Reed Act of 1929, the George-Barden Acts of 1946, 1956, and 1961, the Vocational Education Act of 1963, and the Vocational Education Act Amendments of 1968. In the passage of each of these pieces of legislation, partnerships were continuously developed between vocational education programs and other sectors of education, including college and university partnerships. In particular, the 1968 Amendments allowed for state departments of education to further university-college-school partnerships through the use of RCUs.

The RCUs coordinated research by serving as clearinghouses for research, in some instances housing a state-wide library for vocational curriculum materials, coordinating select aspects of continuing education, and through providing a network for vocational instructors to communicate. Additionally, RCUs typically coordinated research projects at both the state department of education's directive and through self-determined priorities. As the RCUs were disbanded and allowed to be an optional expenditure for state departments, many believed federal

dollars could be better directed at program improvement at more of a grass-roots level. The results were diminished resources for state-level coordination, and greater empowerment in local communities. By 1995, all but a known two RCUs were closed, and other institutions and agencies took responsiblity for their functions.

Data Collection Methods

The methods to collect data from a disbanded and largely segmented population greatly restricted the ability to use any form of survey instrument. Due to resource constraints, a letter was mailed to each state's department of education, requesting a response from the individual responsible for vocational or technical education. A mailing was also completed to the District of Columbia, yielding a total mailing of 51 letters.

The letter requested a description of the current status of state-level research, and to report what had happened to their RCU. Data were collected in the spring of 1992, and follow-up correspondence was completed throughout the summer of 1992.

Presentation of Data

A total of 25 responses were received from various state department or state agency officials describing current state-sponsored research on vocational education. Several of the respondents provided a detailed description of research and development activities since the closure of their state's RCU,

while others provided only a brief statement of research activities.

Each respondent's statement related to research and development has been presented here to allow for the clearest understanding of current research methods and efforts on a state-by-state basis. Quotation marks were used to indicate exact written statements by respondents.

Alabama

"The State Department of Education, Division of Vocational Education Services does not have a Research Development Unit. Due to reduction in staff the RCU and the Curriculum Development Unit have been combined. The Curriculum, Research, and Evaluation Unit has assumed the responsibilities of the old RCU. Services are provided for grant writing and requests for proposals are developed for Tech-Prep consortiums, articulation consortiums and applied programs. The unit coordinates research efforts with the universities, councils on vocational education and other agencies. Follow-up information is disseminated by the curriculum unit. Professional development conferences and training seminars are conducted annually. Membership in consortiums are maintained such as V-TECS, Tech-Prep, SREB, CORD, NNCCVTE, Special Needs, Adult Education and AAVIM. Research materials are requested for agencies who are conducting state-of-the-art studies. Research studies received from NCRVE are shared with vocational administrators. The unit shares research materials with business and industry through apprenticeship programs. The unit is constantly involved in collecting data from programs and planning in-service programs."

Arizona

"Statewide research in Arizona that relates to Vocational-Technological Education is conducted by various universities in the state. We develop a RFP that identifies topics we wish to have researched, and if interested, universities reply to one or more topics.

"In some instances, we provide 'sole source' contracts to a university for continuation of activities requiring more than one to complete. The State of Arizona does have the Arizona Center for Vocational/Technological Education (ACVT/E) located at Northern Arizona University."

District of Columbia

"The State Office of Vocational and Adult Education does not have a distinct research and development unit; however, an educational research assistant is responsible for collecting, coordinating, and analyzing state-wide research. In addition, the Research and Evaluation Branch, District of Columbia public schools is available for technical assistance."

Florida

"The Florida Research and Development Unit was eliminated several years ago due to state-wide budget restrictions. The state coordinates limited research through higher education institutions. As state staff funding is converted to contract dollars, possible internal research activities may arise."

Hawaii

"First, it is important to understand the structure of vocational education in Hawaii. The State Board for Vocational Education, for which the Office of the State Director for Vocational Education serves as staff, is separate from either the secondary or postsecondary operating agencies. Thus, statewide vocational education research may be conducted by the Chancellor for Community Colleges (postsecondary level vocational education), the Occupational Development Section of the Hawaii Department of Education (secondary level vocational education), or the Office of the State Director for Vocational Education.

"The staff person who administered the RCU had the title of Coordinator of Research and Development. That has not changed. The Coordinator currently has the responsibility of researching and preparing reports concerning vocational education issues. Generally speaking, research or evaluation concerning operating agency activities is conducted by operating agency personnel."

Idaho

Idaho no longer has an RCU, but they do fund research activities in two ways: through the state department and through RFP's. The state department has a Director of Research, a position which grew out of the need to focus research on SDE issues. Other research, including projects of a nature to large for SDE staff, or projects which would benefit from being external to SDE, are contracted through RFP's with universities within the state.

Illinois

Illinois used to have an RCU, but reorganized responsibilities into the Vocational Education Program Improvement division of the state department. This has become the office of Innovation and Performance Management (IPM). The IPM focuses on three areas: curriculum development, professional development, and program evaluations. The office contracts with other state agencies, such as higher education institutions, for curriculum development and leadership research, but IPM handles some data analysis and will coordinate state assessments.

Indiana

Indiana never had an RCU, but service units do handle the state library, training services, and adult ABE/GED resources. Data collection activities are handled through the state or the Indiana Commission on Technical Education. Issues for research are also handled through RFP's to non-profits, higher education institutions, school corporations, and PDK International. The biggest problem for Indiana has been the need for someone to coordinate research on vocational and technical education, but they lack the money to fund the position. They also feel they get "more for their money" by using the "bid" process with RFP's.

Iowa

"Presently, Iowa does not have a special unit devoted to the coordination and the conducting of research in vocational education, nor has it had such a unit for numerous years. The functions are carried out by bureau staff at the Department of Education where it is assigned to individual consultants that have responsibility for each program area...individual job descriptions contain responsibilities for coordinating research, staff development, and curriculum development in a consultant's related area."

Louisiana

"Louisiana, like all other states, did have a Research Coordinating Unit as required in the Vocational Education Amendments of 1968. The name has since changed to the Coordinating Unit since this Bureau (Office of Vocational Education) has assumed numerous responsibilities in addition to research activities."

Maine

"The Maine Department of Education currently has one position assigned to coordinate research and evaluation activities with the Bureau of Adult and Secondary Vocational Education. Maine has funded this position since the early seventies. During those early years the person serving in this position was part of a central planning unit which served the entire department. Since 1980 this person directly serves the bureau in the coordination of all research and evaluation activities related to secondary vocational education. Postsecondary vocational education became separate from the department in the mid-eighties."

Maryland

Maryland has no RCU and state department personnel feel that research has come to a "stand-still." The state department offers RFP's to 24 local vocational education administration and research agencies and handles some research through the Research Division in the state department of education. Many of the community colleges respond to the RFP's, and are a major source of research for the SDE. Assessment and evaluation activities have become the responsibility of the Chief of Accountability and Evaluation.

Missouri

The RCU closed in 1984, and the research function moved to the state department under the division of Planning and Evaluation. Since then, the amount of research has decreased, but some research is still done. The Planning and Evaluation division also manages curriculum proposals, research matters, and all contracting for professional development. Missouri would prefer a separate RDU or RCU, but financial means are not available.

Nebraska

"The Research and Development Unit for Vocational Education (RDU) was recently closed due to financial constraints. Current research measures are carried out through an RFP process which is open to universities and community colleges. Additional research activities are disseminated among state department personnel and state department sponsored centers or bureaus. The RDU's responsibility of coordinating short term customized job training programs was taken over by the Department of Economic Development."

New Hampshire

"Last year our department abolished its Research Coordinating Unit, replacing it with Program Improvement, Research and Accountability (PIRA). As the director of PIRA, I report directly to the State Director. My staff is presently limited to one computer program analyst and one secretary. However, PIRA also includes a position for curriculum and staff development, which is presently vacant. In addition, as the director of PIRA I am responsible for overseeing committees that design state policy with regard to Carl D. Perkins, including the development of a statewide system of core standards and measures of performance, and the State Plan. We do not conduct research in the "academic" sense. The majority of our research activities are descriptive, for purposes of reporting, generation of funding formulas and informing policy making. A lack of resources keep us from conducting the types of research considered to be inferential."

North Dakota

"North Dakota has no RDU or RCU. Statewide research is conducted by several agencies, including the Council on Vocational Education, the University of North Dakota, North Dakota State University, and other groups who survey specific populations for information needed to plan activities for our teachers.

"We have a grant to the University of North Dakota for curriculum and research coordination. The person responsible for that is housed in the state vocational-technical agency, and tracks and disseminates research reports and documents. He is also responsible for accessing research results and schooling practices information, including curriculum, for all vocational-technical personnel in the state."

Ohio

"The Division of Vocational and Career Education will continue to utilize one or both of the instructional materials laboratories at The Ohio State University to develop relevant curriculum materials to prepare youth and adults for productive employment.

"Ohio's tradition of outstanding vocational teacher education activities has been continued through the creation of five vocational education regional personnel development centers. The five regional development centers in Ohio were created to train new teachers recruited from business and industry, provide inservice training and upgrading for all existing vocational education teachers, and to conduct research."

Oklahoma

"The Oklahoma Department of Vocational and Technical Education has maintained a research effort since the inception of the RCU's. Currently we have a staff of three full-time research specialists and 3-4 graduate assistants and one full-time secretary.

"The Research Division is housed in the Oklahoma Department of Vocational and Technical Education. The full-time research staff are on the department's payroll while the graduate assistants are on the payroll in the Division of Occupational and Adult Education at Oklahoma State University.

"We feel that the research and development function is crucial to successful vocational and technical education. The Research Division performs a variety of research ranging from applied to experimental. Each year our department identified priority areas and research staff are assigned to conduct the efforts."

Oregon

"Statewide research on vocational technical education issues is approached through several strategies. The state focuses on specific issues through Requests for Proposals (RFP's) and grant-in-aid projects. This office does not operate a Research Coordinating Unit (RCU) as we did in past years when categorical funding was available.

"Our funding sources are state general funds, limited state lottery funds, and federal Carl Perkins funds. During the period 1992-1995, the state is planning for a significant budget reduction. The reductions will affect state agencies, public schools, community colleges, and higher education institutions. The reductions will occur at the same time we are undertaking new initiatives for educational reform. With such dramatic changes, I believe there will be a renewed interest in research."

Pennsylvania

"There is an urgent need for such a unit (RDU). Each state vocational education agency should have the capability to perform R & D related work in vocational education. It is from this perspective that we have put together an organizational chart which shows how we are dealing with research and related issues.

"Our Special Programs Division...has the responsibility for handling our research. The organizational chart illustrates that 'research' falls under the responsibility of the Division of Special Program Services."

Utah

Utah no longer has a research unit. The RCU was closed several years ago due to early retirements. One staff person at the SDE currently handles research, or offers RFP's for more substantial projects.

Vermont

The majority of research and development projects undertaken by the state are coordinated and contracted "out" by the Technical and Adult Education (TAE) Unit within the State Department of Education. Staff from TAE work with others in the State Department to "connect people with similar interests and activities to coordinate research activities as needed." State Department staff conduct research and development activities as determined by State Department administrators. The Vermont RDU was disbanded in 1991.

Washington

"When the requirements for Research Coordinating Units was disbanded with the passage of the Perkins Vocational Education Act, we did not continue with a separate unit for research. Research has been conducted within our Planning and Policy Division on a variety of issues that pertain to vocational education, employment and training, and workforce preparation. Staff from the division will work with other state agencies to provide a comprehensive approach to each individual area of interest or issue. Often times, a committee of local folks including representation from both the private and public sectors will assist in research-type endeavors. We also had occasion to conduct research through the solicitation process or Request for Proposal activity. This process will often involve our two delivery systems, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges."

Wisconsin

"Funded research grant activities in Wisconsin's postsecondary VTAE system were coordinated by the State Board which published requests for proposals and evaluated such proposals for funding under the federal VEA up through fiscal year 1990-1991. As the 1990 VEA Amendments (Perkins II) no longer allow research as a fundable purpose, Wisconsin has no statewide research activities. In addition, research, planning, and development activities (mostly institutional planning) are shared at quarterly meetings of appropriate district and state VTAE staff.

"The Board's RCU (which was the location for ERIC and other microfiche, research reports, and miscellaneous publications) was disbanded in December 1988. From time to time, various organizations specific research activities are conducted in the VTAE system but there is no central repository for these studies."

Wyoming

Wyoming has not RCU or RDU, and handles all research internally or contracts with higher education institutions. The contracts include both sole-source and RFP's.

Discussion

The purpose for conducting this study was to identify what had happened to the former federally-mandated research coordinating bodies and how state departments of education now handle vocational research and development activities. As there is no professional network available to track these former agencies, state department of education officials were asked to respond to a request for information on their RCU, and subsequently, 25 states responsed.

Virtually all of the respondents reported using a request for proposal announcement, contracts, and grants to conduct research. Additionally, many respondents indicated that research efforts were internal, assigned to individuals with expertise or interest in the area in need of research. While this performance is reflective of a "do more with less" philosophy, evident is the lack of an external, grass-roots driven research base. Indeed, this philosophy of concentrated control at the state department level is suggestive of an environment in which accountability and balancing measures may be suspect.

While the RCU mandate was reflective of a strong national vocational education philosophy, current national efforts appear to be directed at a non-intrusive mindset, allowing states the freedom to function as they deem appropriate. The result, however, is the loss of an external body to monitor state departments of education. Additionally, despite efforts aimed at an increasing specialization in education, the current practices of respondents failed to present a convincing argument that those with research capabilities are developing a clear line of inquiry into the effectiveness and innovation in vocational education.

Finally, the linkages between state departments and universities appeared to be alive and well in many states. State departments contracting and issuing RFPs to researchers in university settins is suggestive of a public service model by research institutions; a model providing a combination of research aid and public service. These efforts are to be applauded as state departments and other agencies are forced to increase efforts aimed at fulfilling federal reporting.

The RCUs played an instrumental role in helping to shape the current structure of vocational education in each state. These units were vital in creating a framework for the methodology and foundations to be used in studying vocational curriculum and its relevance to local needs. While current national efforts aimed at program improvement and serving at-risk students are to be applauded, the equilibrium brought on by the RCUs will continue to be missed.

References

Miller, M. T., & Mahler, M. C. (1991). Higher education's role in improving vocational education, identifying key strategies. Macomb, IL: University Council for Vocational Education.

Nystrom, D. C., & Bayne, G. K. (1979). Occupational and career education legislation. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.

Prosser, C. A., & Quigley, T. H. (1949). Vocational education in a democracy. Chicago: American Technical Society.

Roberts, R. W. (1957). Vocational and practical arts education. NY: Harper and Row.